The Basics for Caring for Children In Your Home

**Tips**

---

**Touch – Why We Need It**

Touch can be a challenging topic to discuss. There are strong concerns and issues to consider, such as inappropriate touch and abuse, as well as each person’s individual feelings and history regarding touch. To avoid any confusion or misjudgment, many adults in early care programs simply avoid touch altogether. Without proper training, policies, and researched-based information, early educators may simply be confused as to what touch means in their work. But understanding the meaning of touch in regard to healthy child development is important for early educators.

Young children today are bombarded with media, electronics, and commercialism. They often have busy schedules that consist of many out-of-home activities and care. Results of such a lifestyle may add to the disconnect of nurturing experiences, where comforting relationships are formed and positive physical interactions occur, such as slowing down and reading a book in the lap of a caring adult or holding hands and going on a walk.

Children learn from touch. From the very early stages of life, touch conveys communication and discovery. Teaching children about and providing appropriate touch is part of your responsibilities as an early educator. Valuable information can be found to assist in teaching children appropriate touch through the use of research, self-reflection, and intentional planning.

---

**From “Touch Communicates Distinct Emotion”**

“Touch is central to human social life. It is the most developed sensory modality at birth, and it contributes to cognitive, brain, and socio-emotional development throughout infancy and childhood.”

(Field, 2001; Hertenstein, 2002; Stack, 2001).

---

**Touch: What we know**

We know that children need responsive care and opportunities to build healthy attachments to their caregivers. Physical contact with caregivers can increase attachment, and positive touch may help to reduce the level of the stress hormone cortisol.

It’s difficult to imagine responsive care without holding an infant, rocking a toddler, or graciously accepting the good-morning hug from a happy three-year-old. Physical contact with others is valuable and a critical component of healthy development, but may be missing or misunderstood in many early childhood programs.

It is important to know how child grow and develop, including healthy sexuality development, when examining the role of appropriate touch. Adults who have a clear understanding of children’s healthy sexuality development will have a better sense of what is typical in developmental stages or when there should be a cause for concern.
Touch: How to approach

Touch is a sensitive and personal issue for caregivers, families, and children. Feelings and approaches vary widely and are influenced by personal experiences, culture, and personality. It is critical that other staff, families, and children understand and are comfortable with your program’s approach to touch. In defining your approach, gather information from all groups, starting with yourself.

The value of self-reflection

Understanding your own feelings about touch will affect how you interact with children. Begin by thinking about times that touch has provided you comfort. How and why was this important to you? How was touch used in your family? Think about how you use touch with your own family and friends. Think of how you use touch in your early childhood work community. How do you feel when children hug or touch you? It’s important to reflect and remember that each of us has our own way of looking at touch.

Involve families

Each family in your program can provide information about their family’s approach to touching, specific cultural practices, and unique needs of their child. Parents are the best source to find out about the child’s needs and cultural background. Develop a list of questions to help you gather information. Ask the questions during the enrollment process. You could do this as part of the orientation meeting or in the enrollment questionnaire.

Ask children

Learning about children’s comfort levels, cultural backgrounds, and individual development will provide helpful information in regards to touch. Asking permission and understanding a child’s personal feelings (as well as families’ feelings) and background helps adults understand what is appropriate for each child. NAEYC states in their Position Statement Prevention of Child Abuse, that “Adults should be sensitive to ensuring that their touches (such as pats on the back, hugs, or ruffling the child’s hair) are welcomed by the children and appropriate to their individual characteristics and culture experience.”

After you have defined your approach, inform families of your policies and philosophies on touch. Add a section to your parent handbooks or create a handout for families. Include research and child abuse prevention information. Share what your plans and goals are for teaching children about positive touch and supporting healthy sexual development.

For ideas on teaching young children about touch, read the “Teaching Children about Positive Touch” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1410.pdf)

For information about preparing program policies on positive touch, read the “Keeping the Caring Touch in Early Childhood” tip page. (http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/TIPS/TIPS1409.pdf)

Resources:

- The Touch Research Institute www.miami.edu/touch-research

References:

- The Touch Research Institute www.miami.edu/touch-research